

1 Before Ayutthaya

Ayutthaya looms into history from the late thirteenth century CE. Over the following two centuries it becomes the principal city of a territory known as Siam, occupying the deltaic plain of the Chaophraya River, the Central Plain of Thailand today. To west, north, and east, this plain is bounded by hill ranges straggling southwards from the Himalayas (see Map 1.1). Though the hills are not high, forest made them more forbidding. Within these boundaries, the territory is knitted together by water routes along rivers and coastal seas, the most convenient medium of transport prior to the modern era. As the Chaophraya Plain drops only 80 meters across 500 kilometers from the hills to the sea, rivers are sluggish and craft could be poled or paddled northward for most of the year. The hill boundaries and water communications resulted in Siam developing as a distinctive cultural zone.

Today around 1300 millimeters of rain fall on the 162,000 square kilometers of the Chaophraya River's catchment area from May to October, and most of the runoff is channeled down the Chaophraya. The flow is now controlled by dams and water gates, but earlier it would break the banks and flood the lower delta almost every year. Today the plain is a tessellated landscape of paddy fields. In the past, the ecology was very different. High heat and plentiful water generated a rich and varied biomass ranging from deciduous forest near the hills to tropical rainforest further south and mangroves along the coasts. For humans, this ecology supported both a rich economy of hunting and gathering and a productive agriculture, but also hosted many predators including carnivorous animals, poisonous reptiles, disease-carrying insects, and many germs, viruses, and parasites. Forests were seen as dangerous, especially for their fevers and other deadly diseases. Because of high mortality, the population of Mainland Southeast Asia remained small and sparse, with density between a fifth to tenth of the neighboring zones in China and India.¹

¹ Population is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.



Map 1.1.1. Mainland Southeast Asia

This chapter traces the history of the Chaophraya Plain to the eve of Ayutthaya's foundation, using mainly secondary works. The historiography of this era has been transformed over recent years. The earlier version was a story of competing empires (Pagan, Srivijaya, Angkor, Dvaravati) and broad geopolitical conflict, reminiscent of the world in the twentieth century. With more digging, more inscriptions, more artifacts, new techniques, and more sensitive readings of sources, the story has become more fragmented, less violent, and more subtle.

Early Peoples

Man arrived rather late in Mainland Southeast Asia. Traces of human settlement in the region stretch back around 40,000 years, but these traces are faint. From about 11,000 BCE, when the climate became warmer and wetter, hunter-gatherers using tools made by flaking river pebbles became more common throughout the region. Along the hills that now divide Thailand and Burma are several caves and rock shelters where these Hoabinhian hunter-gatherers spent the rainy seasons.

Around 17,000 years ago, the sea was over 100 meters below the present level. The mainland and the islands of the western archipelago were connected in a single land mass. The sea rose gradually, reaching a maximum of around 4 meters above its present-level at around 6550 BCE, submerging the lower Chaophraya Plain. Thereafter, the sea dropped and the coastline moved south, reaching Bangkok between 3000 and 1000 BCE, and settling near its current site by 500 CE. Recent research shows the sea receded earlier than once thought, revising the long-held view that the lower gulf was underwater in the first millennium CE and that many Dvaravati sites were on the coast of the time.²

Few hunter-gatherer sites have been found in the lowland, probably because such sites are easily obliterated, but two are known on the estuary of the Bang Pakong River. These sites belie the image of hunter-gatherers as small and mobile groups. Khok Phanom Di was occupied for 500 years from around 2000 BCE by a community of several hundred people. At first, they visited temporarily and harvested a huge range of fish and shellfish, supplemented by game and vegetable products from the nearby forests. After settling, they fashioned bone into fish-hooks and other tools, made sea shells into jewelry, manufactured a large quantity and variety of pottery, and ate some rice, perhaps acquired through exchange. After perhaps ten generations of regular settlement, when the sea receded, they fashioned granite into hoes to till the ground, and shells

² Trongjui, "Reconsidering the palaeo-shoreline."

into knives to harvest plants. Several generations later, they began to make larger pots with a different technique and new decoration, hinting at an influx of new people. One woman, probably a master potter, was buried with 120,000 shell disc beads, her tools, and examples of her pottery skill. Around 1600 BCE, the site was abandoned.³ This extraordinary excavation displays the strength and flexibility of the hunter-gatherer economy in this rich environment.

The earliest evidence for rice growing is around 2000 BCE. Some believe it developed locally since wild rice grows naturally in the area, but more likely it came from the mid-Yangzi valley, where domestic rice cultivation was well developed by the fourth millennium BCE, and spread along the coasts to Mainland Southeast Asia in a package with the keeping of cattle and dogs, a style of pottery with curved incisions, and a tradition of inhumation burial.⁴ The researched sites in the Chaophraya Plain are all on the fringe of the western hills, or on the uplands in Lopburi, and may have developed from earlier forager settlements through an influx of new people. The early farmers still gained much of their food from hunting birds, deer, monkeys, crocodiles, rhinos, turtles, and other fauna, and from collecting frogs, fish, and shellfish from the waterways. As Bronson summarized, “No farmers in any region outside southern and eastern Asia could produce as much food with as little labor from the same amount of land.”⁵ In civilization models based on temperate zones, the coming of agriculture is a major disjuncture because agriculture supports larger and denser populations which in turn develop more complex hierarchies. Southeast Asia diverged from this model for the simple reason that the hunter-gatherer economy was so productive. Agriculture did not replace hunter-gathering, but supplemented it.

Bronze appeared around 1250 to 1000 BCE.⁶ Again, the technology most likely arrived from southern China where a well-developed bronze industry using the same techniques flourished by 1500 BCE. A copper mining center has been discovered in the Khao Wong Prachan valley in Lopburi. Bronze was used to make some tools such as axe-heads and needles, but mostly for jewelry and ornaments. The settlements of this era were small, with a maximum of around 250 people, and scattered rather than clustered, possibly to preserve territories for hunting and gathering. After 1000 BCE, people were often buried with fine pots,

³ Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 46–75.

⁴ Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 77–105.

⁵ Bronson, “Extraction of natural resources,” 295.

⁶ Some scholars argue for an earlier date around 2000–1800 BCE; see the discussion in Rispoli, Ciaria, and Pigott, “Establishing the prehistoric cultural sequence,” 119–34, and Higham, Douka, and Higham, “New chronology for the Bronze Age.”

tools, jewelry, animal parts, or clay figurines of domesticated animals. One site shows evidence of a dominant chiefly lineage, but at present it stands as an exception. What is truly striking is the variety – both within a single community, and between locations – on burial practices, pottery styles, taste in jewelry, and cultic objects. Two villages only 20 kilometers apart maintained completely different pottery traditions over several hundred years.⁷

Overall the archeological record to this point at present suggest a range of small local communities where the environment provided a good living, where neither economic monopoly nor armed political domination was creating any significant social division, where there was a high degree of local experimentation in cultural and ritual practices, and where inter-community exchanges were common but socially neutral.

Around 500 BCE, communities began to make things from iron. While copper and tin for making bronze were found in only a few locations, the raw material for iron was widely available in laterite rocks. The technology may have evolved locally but again the date is late enough that diffusion from elsewhere is more likely, possibly from India as humped (zebu) cattle also appeared in the same era.⁸ The first iron articles were decorative goods, mimicking bronze examples, but before long the main usage was to make implements for agriculture and hunting – knives, sickles, hoes, billhooks, digging sticks, and spades.⁹ The impact of iron was much greater than bronze.

Population expanded. On the Isan Plateau, where the archeological work has been more intense, over 1,500 Iron Age sites have been counted. Some could have accommodated over 2,000 people.¹⁰ In the Chaophraya Plain, many sites have been found around the old copper-working area in Lopburi, in the Lower Pasak valley, along the MaeKlong and Bang Pakong rivers, and farther north along the Ping and Yom rivers. An increase in burials at the Lopburi sites suggests population growth.¹¹

A distinctive form of settlement appeared – the moated mound. The original pattern for these may have been a natural landform, but it was improved by adding moats in concentric rings. The water may have been used for irrigation, but more likely they provided a secure domestic water

⁷ Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 130–55; Glover, Pornchai, and Villiers, *Early metallurgy*; Solheim and Ayres, “Late prehistoric and early historic pottery.”

⁸ Rispoli, Ciaria, and Pigott, “Establishing the prehistoric cultural sequence,” 134–5.

⁹ Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 167–80; Glover, Pornchai, and Villiers, *Early metallurgy*.

¹⁰ Srisakara, *Isan*, 37–60.

¹¹ Srisakara, “Early urban centres in the Chao Phraya valley”; Rispoli, Ciaria, and Pigott, “Establishing the prehistoric cultural sequence,” 135–6

supply through the long dry season and periods of drought.¹² Graves suggest craft skills became more developed, more specialized, and more valued: metal-workers, potters, and textile makers were all buried with the tools of their trade. Burials show more clustering into what may be clans, with more variation by gender and age. A few sites show stronger evidence of chiefs or chiefly lineages. At Ongbah Cave on the Khwae Yai River, some men were buried in hardwood coffins carved with the images of bird's heads and filled with beads, bronze ornaments, iron tools, and weapons – lances, spears, and halberds.¹³ Other sites have yielded arrowheads, projectiles for pellet bows, and spears which have been “killed,” possibly in honor of a warrior.¹⁴ But much of this could still come from a hunting culture. No arsenals have been found, and no definite proof of fortifications.

In the sites along the lower reaches of the rivers, exotic goods appear in the graves, including beads and figurines from India, and several high-tin bronze bowls decorated with vegetation, dwellings, the first pictorial representation of humans, along with images of sheep and horses, which are not native to Southeast Asia.¹⁵ While sites on the west of the plain show linkage westward to India either by sea or over the portage routes, especially via the Three Pagodas Pass, sites on this western side have yielded glass beads also found down the Malay Peninsula, and green stone ear rings, bone combs, and ornaments found also in Vietnam, the Philippines, and southern China. Graves from this era contain more exotic status-defining goods, suggesting the emergence of “a farmer-warrior elite.”¹⁶ Fragments of pottery carry Indian religious symbols and excerpts of written scripts.¹⁷

Who were these early peoples? To date, the discussion of the early peopling of the region has been dominated by linguists using a model of languages developing by division and diffusion from a common core. Benedict traced all the major Southeast Asian language families back to a single root in southern China; the Austronesian family branched off first by ocean travel and developed into Malay and the related languages of the archipelago; the Austroasiatic or Mon-Khmer family passed by land or sea into Mainland Southeast Asia.¹⁸ Bellwood and Blust proposed that Mon-Khmer moved with the spread of the new rice agriculture from the

¹² O'Reilly, “Increasing complexity.”

¹³ Sorensen, “Ongbah cave and its fifth drum.”

¹⁴ Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 179–80.

¹⁵ Higham and Rachanie, *Early Thailand*, 172–5; Glover and Bellina, “Ban Don Ta Phet and Khao Sam Kaeo.”

¹⁶ Rispoli, Ciaria, and Pigott, “Establishing the prehistoric cultural sequence,” 136.

¹⁷ Borell, Bellina, and Boonyarit, “Contacts between the upper Thai–Malay peninsula and the Mediterranean world”; Bellina, “Development of coastal polities.”

¹⁸ Benedict, *Austro-Thai language and culture*.

third millennium BCE. From eastern India through to Vietnam, the different Mon-Khmer languages share the same words for rice and bronze, and have similar words for millet, winnowing, transplanting, dogs, goats, bronze, and getting drunk on liquor – implying that these peoples knew about these things before they became scattered over a wide area.¹⁹ Bellwood argues that rice agriculture was spread by waves of migration that superseded the hunter-gatherers, whose remnants are small negrito groups like the Senoi and Hlabri, still found in the depths of the forests.²⁰

In this view, packages of peoples, languages, and technologies are layered onto the landscape like the layers in an archeological dig. But gene pools and various forms of knowledge (technology, ritual) may not have traveled together. Genes can be transmitted in small samples. Ideas, languages, and technologies may move with people or with artifacts. In the past, when rather little research was available, the archeological record suggested great discontinuities, occasioned by outside forces such as migration, but as the record has thickened, the continuities are more striking. The long-range studies of the hunter-gatherer settlements in the Bang Pakong estuary and the metal-working communities in Lopburi show people adjusting to successive changes in the environment, with some innovations brought by people from outside. Some elements of language may have arrived from southern China along with rice and bronze, but others may have come from India with the craftsmen and traders of exotic goods. The earliest representations of human faces in the Chaophraya Plain in stucco found at Nakhon Pathom and other sites are striking for the variety in shape and features.²¹

A DNA analysis of skeletons from sites in the Upper Mun Basin from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE showed that the people today who are most closely related to these ancient people are the Chao Bon or Nyah-Kur, a Mon-Khmer speaking group that still lives on the nearby hills.²² Such small Mon-Khmer speaking communities are found from the Annamite cordillera to western India. In such a fragmented area, local languages would originally have been very diverse. The Mon-Khmer languages probably developed as lingua franca as trade and exchange increased, especially along the coasts.²³

¹⁹ Zide and Zide, “Cultural vocabulary”; Blust, “Beyond the Austronesian homeland”; Higham, “Archaeology, linguistics and the expansion of the East and Southeast Asian neolithic.”

²⁰ Bellwood, “Southeast Asia before history,” 91; Bellwood, “Cultural and biological differentiation.”

²¹ Best seen in the collection in the Phra Pathom Chedi National Museum, Nakhon Pathom.

²² Patcharee et al., “Genetic history of Southeast Asian populations,” 436–9.

²³ Bayard’s comments on Shorto, “The linguistic protohistory,” in Smith and Watson, *Early Southeast Asia*, 279–80.

In sum, nature provided very rich livelihoods for early peoples in the Chaophraya Plain, but also presented them with many threats from predators and disease. Life expectancy was low. The population increased slowly. Settlements were small and stayed mostly on the uplands on the edges of the plain. Perhaps the climate was wetter than today, the forest in the Chaophraya Plain denser, and the predators more prolific. Because the hunter-gatherer economy was so productive, the arrival of agriculture was much less of a revolution than in temperate zones. Bronze also had a limited impact, and was used mainly for personal ornamentation. Only with the arrival of iron was there more significant change – slightly larger settlements, some sign of social division, and more exchange, but no stark social division, no political integration, and very limited evidence of violence. From the early centuries CE, the pace of change picked up, in part because of influences arriving from outside, mainly from India.

Towns

In the early centuries CE, the region slips from prehistory to history, with the appearance of monumental buildings and inscriptions, and with records in the Chinese gazetteers. From the sixth or seventh century CE, larger settlements appear throughout the Chaophraya Plain. They are influenced by cultural imports from India, where urban societies had developed a thousand years earlier.

Contacts

In the last few centuries BCE, Mediterranean traders reached India, and Arab and Indian sailors mastered the technique of crossing the Indian Ocean using the rhythm of the monsoons.²⁴ Indian writings of this era mention *Suvarnadvipa* or *Suvarnabhumi*, a land of gold, which translated into the *Golden Chryse* or *Golden Chersonese* for Greek and Roman geographers, and *Kimlin* or *Chinlin* in Chinese. This term arose because of gold found in Sumatra and on the peninsula that served as both a bridge and a barrier between east and west, but also because of other economic opportunities. By the fourth or fifth centuries BCE, there were settlements on the middle peninsula using portage routes to connect the trade systems of the Indian Ocean and South China Seas. Between the fourth and second centuries BCE at Khao Sam Kaeo on the east coast of the peninsula, a large Indian-style settlement appeared making products

²⁴ Glover, “Early trade between India and South-East Asia”; Ray, “Early maritime contacts.”

of stone, glass, ceramics, and metals – a relocation of Indian production to better access markets in the South China Seas. The settlement grew Japanese-style rice along with pulses, cotton, and sesame from India.²⁵ Short-range trading systems were now chained together from China to Europe. By the first century CE, European objects, especially Roman intaglios, coins, and medallions, had reached several sites on the middle and upper peninsula.²⁶ The first Chinese account of the portage routes dates to the first or second century BCE.

Early Arab and Chinese accounts record that Southeast Asians were great seafarers. A Chinese text from the third century CE described Southeast Asian ships with a sense of wonder: “The large ones are more than fifty meters in length ... they carry from six to seven hundred persons, with 10,000 bushels [c. 600 tons] of cargo.” Archeologists have found remnants dated to the fourth century CE, and some images are known from carvings and murals. These ships were built with fiber-lashed planks, up to four masts, and heavy cladding. The Chinese had nothing to rival them until the ninth century CE, and European visitors were stunned by the size and sophistication of their later form.²⁷

From the first century CE, the Han Chinese also became interested in the peninsula.²⁸ The growing power and profligacy of the Chinese imperial court created a demand for many exotic items from tropical and subtropical areas including kingfisher feathers, pearls, ivory, rhino horn, and precious stones, but especially perfumes of all kinds including aromatic woods. The peninsula became famed in the Chinese courts as the source of the best aloes wood: “It is like something belonging to the immortals ... Light one stick and the whole house is filled with a fragrant mist which is still there after three days.”²⁹ From 240 CE the Chinese court developed the tribute system, under which local rulers gained access to trade with China, along with political recognition, by offering tribute. Between 600 and 850, the Chinese court received 110 tribute missions from thirty-four named places in Southeast Asia, of which half sent only one mission.³⁰ Many were probably on the peninsula, including five states that may have controlled portage routes across the peninsula (see Map 1.1).³¹

²⁵ Bellina et al., “Development of coastal polities”; Castillo, Bellina, and Fuller, “Rice, beans and trade crops.”

²⁶ Borell, Bellina, and Boonyarit, “Contacts between the upper Thai–Malay peninsula and the Mediterranean world.”

²⁷ Manguin, “Trading ships of the South China Sea,” quote on 262.

²⁸ Wade, “Beyond the southern borders,” 25.

²⁹ Wolters, “Tambralinga,” 600.

³⁰ Smith, “Mainland Southeast Asia in the seventh and eighth centuries,” 444.

³¹ See also the speculative map in Wade, “Beyond the southern borders,” 27.

Around 400 CE, a master mariner from the eastern coast of India left a carving of a Buddhist stupa near Kedah.³² In the eighth century on the Takua Pa portage route there was a South Indian settlement, managed by a merchant guild and protected by a garrison of soldiers.³³ On the east coast around Nakhon Si Thammarat, around ninety sites have been found with Brahmanical artifacts including elaborate hilltop temple complexes, dating from the fifth century CE onwards.³⁴ The Chinese records describe local communities adopting Indian religious practice, including at Panpan in the seventh century:

In the country are numerous Brahmins come from India in search of wealth. They are in high favour with the King ... There are ten monasteries where Buddhist monks and nuns study their canon ... the King of P'an-p'an sent accredited envoys to present, among other things, a tooth of the Buddha, painted stupas and ten varieties of perfume.³⁵

The Gods Came

According to legend, in the mid-third century BCE during the time of the emperor Asoka, monks were sent to carry Buddhist teachings to Suvarnabhumi. The Ceylonese *Mahavamsa* chronicle describes the travels of two Buddhist monks to Suvarnabhumi in what may be the same era.³⁶ In the first century CE, Chinese monks came in the other direction, crossing Mainland Southeast Asia to find teachings, texts, and relics in India and Sri Lanka. Religious objects from India, probably carried by merchants, reached Southeast Asia by the early centuries CE. A sixth-century CE Chinese record of Dunxun states,

there are five hundred families of *hu* [maybe merchants] from India, two *fo-t'u* [maybe Buddhists] and more than a thousand Indian Brahmins. The people of Tun-sun practise their doctrine and give them away their daughters in marriage; consequently many of the Brahmins do not go away.³⁷

According to Piriya Krairiksh, Vishnu images and Shiva-*linga* appeared on the peninsula from the fourth century CE, and in the Chaophraya Plain from the sixth, while the first Buddha image from the peninsula dates to the fifth century, and the earliest representation of the Buddha

³² Ray, "Early maritime contacts," 53.

³³ Christie, "Medieval Tamil-language inscriptions."

³⁴ Wannasarn, *Tambralinga and Nakhon Si Thammarat*, ch. 3.

³⁵ Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, 48–9.

³⁶ Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, 181.

³⁷ Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, 17; Wade, "Beyond the southern borders," 28; Prapod, *Ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism*, 67.

from the Chaophraya Plain to the early sixth.³⁸ Other historians differ somewhat in the dating. The first inscriptions date to the sixth century. They are written in Mon and Sanskrit, with terms or quotations from the Buddhist scriptures rendered in Pali, using a script developed from a south Indian type once called Pallava but now Late Southern Brahmi.

Between the seventh and twelfth centuries, a large number of images and other religious artifacts were produced in the Chaophraya Plain. They include various representations of the major Hindu gods, many minor Hindu deities, and Buddha images in various poses. Art historians have traced the stylistic influences on this corpus to Sri Lanka, Pallava southern India, Ellora, and Amaravati in the Krishna-Godavari delta area, but also in some cases to the Ganges valley, and even parts of western India. This wide range of geographical origins suggests the complexity of trade and cultural contacts. The variety in the iconography suggests many sects and schools, but how they were divided is unknown. In an early relief in the Saraburi Bodhisattva Cave, where the Buddha is depicted preaching to Shiva and Vishnu in the heavens, the Buddha is higher and larger, but the two Hindu gods are shown in regal rather than votive poses, and are only slightly deferential, while a Hindu-style rishi kneels in worship (Figure 1.1). At another cave near Ratchaburi, an inscription records that the Buddhist image was “the pious work of a holy rishi.”³⁹ A Chinese report on Panpan (probably on the peninsula) noted, “The people all learn the Brahminical writings and greatly reverence the law of the Buddha.”⁴⁰ At Si Thep, Buddhism seems to have co-existed with worship of the Hindu sun-god.⁴¹ From this early period, Hindu gods seem to have been accommodated with the Buddha.

Many images follow classic Indian iconography, but others have variations which show local influence. Only four three-dimensional versions of wheels of the law have been found in South Asia, compared to over forty in and around the Chaophraya Plain.⁴² Votive tablets with a haloed Buddha seated on a throne and flanked by two *bodhisattas* have been found in the Chaophraya Plain, peninsula, Java, Burma, and Vietnam, but are unknown in India.⁴³ The appearance of the earth goddess, Mae Thorani, in the legend of Buddha subduing Mara – one of the most popular representations of Buddha from the eleventh century onwards – is based on a text found only in Southeast Asia.

³⁸ Piriya, *Roots of Thai art*, 48–9, 54–5, 100–1.

³⁹ Brown, *Dvāravatī wheels of the law*, 30.

⁴⁰ Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, 48.

⁴¹ Pattaratorn, “Transformation of Brahmanical and Buddhist imagery.”

⁴² Brown, *Dvāravatī wheels of the law*, 160.

⁴³ Skilling, “Buddhism and the circulation of ritual,” 377–8; Skilling, “Dvaravati: recent revelations and research,” 107.



Figure 1.1. Buddha, Shiva, and Vishnu in the Saraburi Bodhisattva Cave, 6th century CE (photograph courtesy of Paisarn Piammettawat, River Books, Bangkok)

The Buddha and the Hindu gods were dovetailed with local religious practices including ancestor worship, fertility ceremonies, and spirit cults. This was nothing new. These religions had triumphed on the Indian subcontinent through their ability to coexist with earlier beliefs. The *naga*, probably the most widespread local spirit in Mainland Southeast Asia, was folded effortlessly into both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Buddha is sometimes found standing on a strange mythical animal, dubbed Panaspati. Several figurines have been found of a nude boy leading a monkey. The stucco and carvings from the earliest Hindu and Buddhist temples in the region include pot-bellied dwarfs, grinning lions, monsters, and mutated animals, as well as scenes probably portraying fertility rituals. Early Buddhist practice focused greatly on relics of the Buddha and the erection of reliquary stupas to house them. Buddhist monks from China traveled to the region in part because of its rising fame as a source of relics. Buddha may have been initially accepted as “the great ancestor.” At some places, relic stupas were built over earlier graveyards.⁴⁴ Early religious sites were often outside the towns: in caves, on mountain tops, at river confluences – probably places already sacred and now redefined as the residence of a Hindu god or stopping place of the journeying Buddha.

As Robert Brown summarizes, “it was the gods themselves who came to South East Asia and were embraced.”⁴⁵ How they were represented and worshipped was often a local affair.

Buddhist Beginnings

Older historiography was intent on showing that the Buddhism found in the Chaophraya Plain from the fifth to seventh centuries onwards was the Theravada form found in modern Thailand. More recently scholars have noted that the vocabulary of sectarian affiliations, including the term “Theravada” (way of the elders), is a modern invention.⁴⁶ Early Buddhism in the Chaophraya Plain seems to have had seeds of the practice later termed “Theravada,” but also other tendencies.

From the first two Buddhist Councils after the death of Gotama Buddha, debates arose over the interpretation of his teachings and the development of his legacy. Several schools appeared. Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka emerged as an important center, where monks committed

⁴⁴ Winai, “Jaruek dong mae nang mueang,” 21–2.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Dvāravātī wheels of the law*, 99.

⁴⁶ Skilling et al., *How Theravāda is Theravāda?*

the Buddha's teachings to writing using the Pali language, rather than Sanskrit favored elsewhere. These scriptures included a seven-book section known as the *Abhidhamma* with a distinctive system of metaphysics. While the Lanka school accepted that there had been Buddhas before Gotama, they argued that the teachings were constant and they focused on Gotama. The Lanka monks also compiled a chronicle of Buddhism which claimed an uninterrupted linear descent from the Buddha through the first disciples and Emperor Asoka to their lineage at Anuradhapura. Over time the Lankan practice was identified as those following the way of the *sthavira* or *thera*, Sanskrit and Pali respectively for "elders."⁴⁷ As Buddhism faded in its original homeland, these distinctive features gave the Lankan center a strong appeal to monastic communities and political leaders elsewhere.

The early Buddhist texts and objects from the Chaophraya Basin clearly show influence from this center in Sri Lanka, though probably transmitted via India. Inscriptions use Pali for Buddhist terms and repeatedly quote three scriptural extracts. The first is the *Ye dhamma* verse, found in twenty-six of the forty-two known inscriptions. On hearing this alone, the two early disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, were converted to Buddhism and set on the path to enlightenment.

The states that have arisen from a cause
Their cause the Tathāgata proclaims,
As well as their cessation.
This is the teaching of the Great Ascetic. (tr. Peter Skilling)

The second is the *Paticcasamuppada* or theory of dependent origination. In the days immediately after enlightenment, the Buddha gave this explanation of the causes underlying human suffering. The third is the first sermon in which he presented the Four Noble Truths for overcoming this suffering.⁴⁸ These are key texts for Theravada but also for other schools of Buddhism.

Among the many variations within Buddhism in the first millennium CE was a different stream of thought and practice dubbed Mahayana or the "Great Vehicle." Its distinctive features included a belief in the realization of Buddhahood by all beings, and its development of a more varied iconography featuring *bodhisattas* in pursuit of Buddhahood, historical Buddhas other than Gotama, and ancillary gods and goddesses. In early images from Southeast Asia, the most common pose is Buddha

⁴⁷ Gethin, "Was Buddhagosa a Theravādin?"

⁴⁸ Revire, "Glimpses of Buddhist practices and rituals," 253–7; Skilling, "Precious deposits," 59–60.

subduing Mara, which was popular also in Lanka and became a classic image of Theravada, but there are also many images of Avalokiteshwara, the Buddha of compassion, and of Prajnaparamita, the female deity and embodiment of perfect wisdom, both of which would be classified as Mahayana in today's vocabulary. Inscriptions were made in Sanskrit as well as Pali. The visiting Chinese monk Yijing in the late seventh century noted that Hinayana and Mahayana approaches "are practiced in a mixed way" in Southeast Asia.⁴⁹

As it later developed, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia was defined not only by doctrine but also by practice, especially the role of a community of renunciant monks dependent on support from the laity. There are faint signs of such practice in this era. Early inscriptions show the importance of earning merit, in order to achieve a better rebirth, by offering charity to monks or constructing religious buildings. Yijing mentioned that monks in Dvaravati performed "the begging *dhuta*," and a terracotta fragment from U Thong appears to show three monks on almsround.⁵⁰

The practices known today, and the divisions between schools and sects, are the result of a long development, and cannot be assumed back into the past. Although some roots of Theravada Buddhism were present in this era, so too were other tendencies.

Riverside Towns

From around the sixth century, there was a shift to living in larger settlements. In India over the previous millennium, rules and conventions for urban living had been built into custom and law. People lived longer if they were careful about their food, washed often, had good drinking water, and follow some social restrictions. Some of these rules and customs may have arrived with the gods. Perhaps the first of these towns, U Thong, was built in a bow of a river in the shape of a conch shell, measuring 1.7 by 0.8 kilometers, far larger than any earlier site. Along the riverbanks nearby there were other settlements connected by roads and waterways.⁵¹ The largest of these early towns, Nakhon Pathom, measuring 3.7 by 2.0 kilometers, had a moat, canals running through the town, and over a hundred buildings with brick bases. At its center was the Phra Pathon Stupa, founded possibly in the late seventh century and massive for its time.⁵² Other major religious

⁴⁹ Deeg, "Sthavira, Thera," 154; Skilling, "Buddhism and the circulation of ritual."

⁵⁰ Revire, "Glimpses of Buddhist practices and rituals," 241–52.

⁵¹ Boisselier, *Nouvelles connaissances archéologiques*; Wheatley, *Nāgara and commandery*.

⁵² Piriya, "Phra Pathon Chedi," esp. 233–4.

monuments were outside the city wall, hinting at a division between town-dwellers and forest-dwellers in the monkhood. Canals ran out into the surrounding countryside, where there was a penumbra of smaller settlements.⁵³ Towns also appeared at Ratchaburi and around Phetchaburi.

To the east of the Chaophraya River, conch-shaped towns measuring around 1.4 by 0.8 kilometers appeared at Mueang Phra Rot and Dong Si Mahosot, each with a penumbra of satellite settlements, similar to Nakhon Pathom.⁵⁴ Lopburi is probably the site of Lavapura mentioned in inscriptions, but its early form has been obscured by later development. The second largest town may have been Si Thep, a moated site in the Pasak River valley, which was occupied from the sixth century, expanded many times, and embellished with several large monuments, including Khao Klang Nok, 64 meters square and around 20 meters high, built with large laterite blocks in a unique design.⁵⁵ Sap Champa, another important site, lay close by. Another group is found on the lower Ping River above Nakhon Sawan.⁵⁶ Around thirty-five to forty of these town sites are known (see Map 1.2). Others may have been effaced by later development. The Chinese records of this era mention several places, but the names are difficult to match with the sites.⁵⁷ Early inscriptions from these towns are in Mon and Indian languages, suggesting Mon became a lingua franca as people congregated in towns and trading networks thickened.⁵⁸

Dvaravati, Trade, and Rule

In the early seventh century, a traveler from Annam sailed with his parents to Duoluobodi (To-lo-po-ti) where he “renounced the world and became a monk,” before traveling further to China, Sri Lanka, and India. Two other monks, Xuanzang (Hsüang-tsang) and Yijing (I-tsing), heard of the place and located it between Sriksheṭṭra (Prome, now in Burma) and Isanapura (Sambor Prei Kuk, now in Cambodia), but paid no visit. These fragmentary accounts found their way into a Tang encyclopedia. Duoluobodi sent three tribute missions to China in 638, 640, and 649. George Coedès identified Duoluobodi with a name found on

⁵³ Dupont, *L'archéologie mène de Dvāravātī*, 20–1; Dhida, “State formation in the lower Tha Chin-Mae Khong basin”; Piriya, *Roots of Thai art*, 54–5.

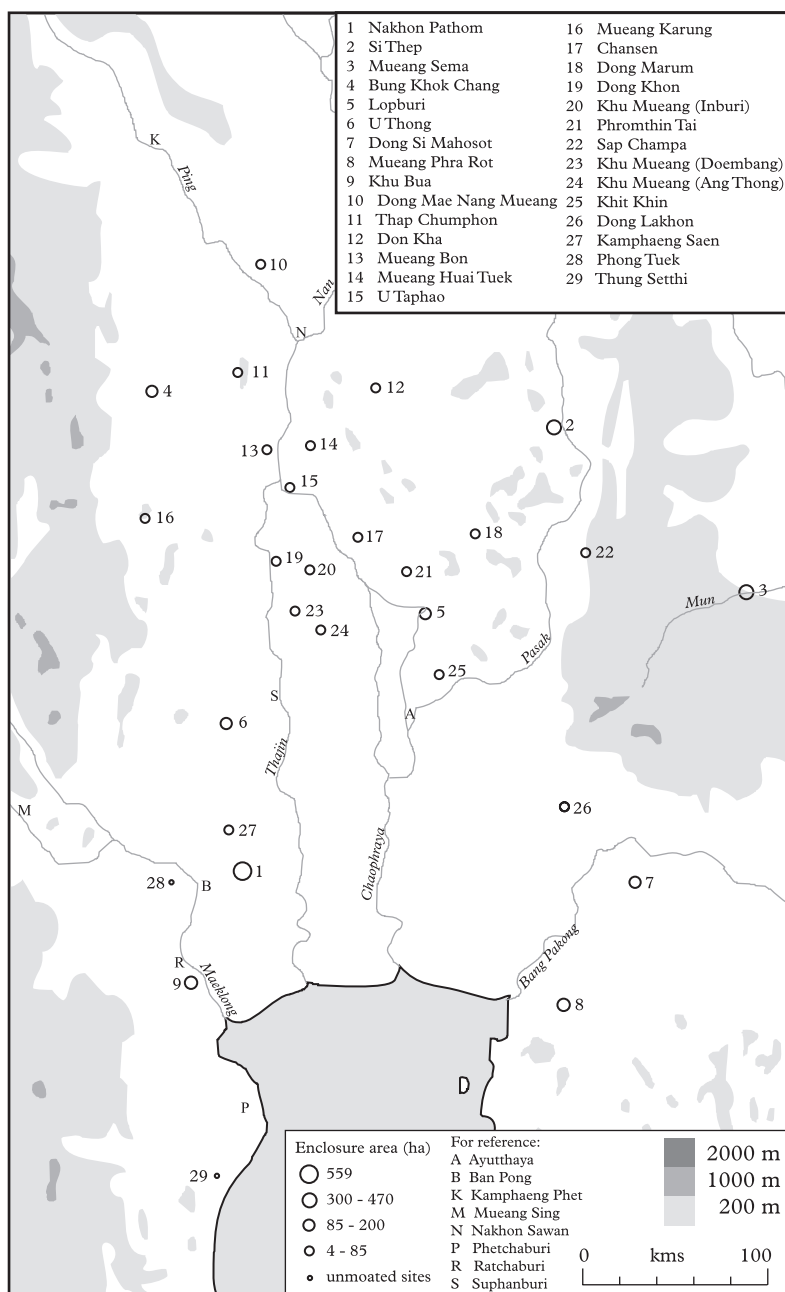
⁵⁴ Srisakara, “Political and cultural continuities at Dvaravati sites.”

⁵⁵ Skilling, “L’énigme de Si Thép.”

⁵⁶ Murphy and Pimchanok, “Fifty years of archeological research”; Winai, “Jaruek dong mae nang mueang.”

⁵⁷ Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*.

⁵⁸ Bauer, “Notes on Mon epigraphy.”



Map 1.2. Town sites in the Chaophraya Plain in the first millennium (based, with permission, on an original by Matt Gallon)

medallions first discovered at Nakhon Pathom, inscribed with a Sanskrit phrase “sridvaravatisvarapunya,” meaning “merit of the lord of glorious Dvaravati.” Similar medallions were found in around ten other sites around the Chaophraya Plain. A fragmentary inscription on an image base found near Khorat reads “daughter of the Lord of Dvaravati ... the queen set up this image ... this of the Tathagata.”⁵⁹ The Tongdian, a Tang encyclopedia compiled over 766–801 CE, describes a state called Touhe (T’ou-ho) which has sometimes been identified with Dvaravati but more likely was in the archipelago.⁶⁰

The name Dvaravati, meaning “possessing gates,” appears as Krishna’s city in Indian texts, and was used as a place-name in ancient India, Arakan, Burma, and Cambodia. Coedès proposed there was a “Dvaravati kingdom” in the lower Chaophraya Plain.⁶¹ Debate went back and forth on Dvaravati’s location, with Nakhon Pathom favored due to its size. Sukhothai inscriptions 2 and 11 refer to a city that is probably Nakhon Pathom as *nakhon phra krit*, the city of Lord Krishna, suggesting this identification may be right.⁶²

Art historians adopted Dvaravati as the catch-all description for art and architectural styles which developed in the Chaophraya Plain and later spread further afield to north, east, and south. The term was also applied to the period from the sixth to eleventh century when these styles flourished. As the term “Dvaravati” was thus stretched over a wide expanse of space and time, there was a strong temptation to stretch its political meaning too. Yet the sum total of sources on Dvaravati is presented in the single paragraph at the start of this section. Dvaravati was probably one of many city-states that appeared in this era and had a handful of mentions in Chinese sources over a brief span of years. The appearance of “Dvaravati” in the official city titles of the future capitals of Ayutthaya and Bangkok suggests some larger importance, but could be an invention of tradition.

This was a time of increasing trade, both internal and external. The diffusion of “Dvaravati” style was associated with expansion of trade rather than political power. The Chinese account of Dunxun states, “At this mart East and West meet together so that daily there are innumerable people there. Precious goods and rare merchandise – there is nothing which is not there.”⁶³ Chinese records mention the use of seed-like coinage made from

⁵⁹ Skilling, “Dvaravati: Recent revelations and research”; Wade, “Beyond the southern borders,” 27.

⁶⁰ Yamamoto, “East Asian historical sources for Dvāravatī studies.”

⁶¹ Coedès, *Indianized states of Southeast Asia*, 76–7.

⁶² Winai, “Silajaruek wat si chum,” 43, 79–80; Pramuan jaruek samai phraya lithai, 153–8.

⁶³ Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, 16.

a metal such as silver or lead.⁶⁴ The towns of this era were sited on trade routes by river and land. Phong Tuek lay on the way to the Three Pagodas Pass, and outposts have been found further up this route with remains of trade goods.⁶⁵ Dong Mae Nang Mueang straddled the route leading up the Chaophraya river system to the north. Beyond Si Mahosot lay a route towards the Tonle Sap and the Lower Mekong. Si Thep and Mueang Sema lay on routes from the Chaophraya Plain to the long-standing areas of settlement on the Isan Plateau. Exotic goods arrived along these routes. A Roman-style lamp, probably made in the eastern Mediterranean between the fifth and seventh century CE, was found at Phong Tuek.⁶⁶ A third-century Roman coin, images of Sogdian traders, and pottery from India and Tang China were found at U Thong. Even the inland site of Chansen has turned up a wide range of exotic goods from east and west, while Phromthin Tai near Lopburi has yielded hoards of coins as well as trading goods, suggesting a major commercial center, and Dong Mae Nang Mueang had remains of both Persian and Chinese pottery.⁶⁷

Chiefs began to call themselves with Indic-influenced names, especially the suffix *-varman* meaning the protégé of a god, and Sanskrit titles meaning king or ruler (*isvara*). In one inscription from U Thong, the grandson of a former ruler claims to have “obtained the lion throne through regular succession.”⁶⁸ Terracotta trays found at Nakhon Pathom were decorated with Indic symbols of royalty such as fly-whisks, parasols, conches, turtles, thunderbolts, and elephant goads.⁶⁹ Most of these places, however, were modest trading towns and the Indic ideas and symbols may represent more pretension than reality. Relatively few inscriptions have been found – a tiny fraction of the number found in the Khmer country from the same period. Many are in vernacular languages, especially Mon, and a large proportion were authored by commoners, suggesting there was no monopoly on this technique held by a royal elite. Coins and medallions are not stamped with the royal symbols likely to be favored by rulers, but with religious symbols (conch, *Om*), or images of prosperity (pots-of-plenty, cow-and-calf) likely to appeal to merchants. The most common symbol – the *śrīvatsa* or abode of the fertility goddess – seems to combine both these possibilities.⁷⁰ The biggest project of sculpture from this era – on the laterite wall of a water tank

⁶⁴ Wicks, “Ancient coinage of Mainland Southeast Asia,” 209–10.

⁶⁵ Dhida, (*Sri*) *Dvaravati*, 116.

⁶⁶ Borell, “Early Byzantine lamp from Pong Tuk.”

⁶⁷ Wicks, *Money, markets, and trade*, 165.

⁶⁸ Brown, *Dvāravatī wheels of the law*, 49.

⁶⁹ Boeles, “King of Sri Dvāravatī,” 107–9; Higham, *Early cultures*, 257.

⁷⁰ Wicks, “Ancient coinage of Mainland Southeast Asia,” 211–12.

at Si Mahosot – portrays animals rather than gods or kings. The cultural material shows great local variety.⁷¹

Indian concepts, words, and symbols may have served to strengthen rulers, but Buddhism may have imposed some constraints. An inscription from the Pasak basin records that a king must “have formidable power feared by all the enemies from nearby towns,” but also must “have integrity ... have wisdom” and “be benevolent.” Another inscription from Sap Champa states that the ruler is “a follower of Buddhism ... a great king and leader ... who practises dharma, gives alms, and has compassion.” A seventh-century ruler of Si Thep claimed to be “powerful and the terror of his enemies” but also possessing “renowned moral principles.” In two legends about Nakhon Pathom, the ruler accidentally kills his own father and must redeem himself by religious devotion and patronage, including building the great stupa.⁷²

There may have been a state of Dvaravati and it may have enjoyed prominence for a short time, but this was an era of many independent towns. Srisakara suggests there may have been several loose confederations along different river courses.⁷³

The Influence of Angkor

Over this same era, a different society and culture developed to the east. Around the Tonle Sap, farmers developed techniques for storing water, which enabled production of a large agricultural surplus supporting a dense population. Local chiefs gained control over land, extracted a surplus of rice and manpower, and invested these in military might and ritual display. By the ninth century, they had built a capital at Angkor that surpassed in splendor anywhere else in the region, before or since.⁷⁴

Provincial lords beyond the Angkor heartland built towns and temples which copied Angkor styles, including symmetrical plans for towns and temples, rectangular *barai* ponds, laterite for building, and respect for the Hindu gods. This trend flowed northwards across the Dangrek range onto the Isan Plateau. Many small *wat* were built in the center of old moated settlements, copying Angkor styles but also showing local individuality through animal imagery, rustic scenes, and humorous touches in the decoration. In the eleventh century, a local family that adopted

⁷¹ Phiraphon, *Mueang si mahosot*; Pattaratorn, “In search of Maitreya,” esp. 98–9.

⁷² Dhida, (*Sri*) *Dvaravati*, 77, 206; Higham, *Early cultures*, 261; Woodward, “Studies in the art of Central Siam,” 155–6; Woodward, “What there was before Siam,” 25.

⁷³ Srisakara, “Political and cultural continuities at Dvaravati sites,” 233–5.

⁷⁴ Vickery, *Society, economy and politics*; Vickery, “Reign of Sūryavarman I.”

the Sanskrit name Mahidharapura built a temple at Phimai with a precisely symmetrical layout and a main tower with a unique curved lotus shape. Around 1112, a sixteen-year-old descendant of this family killed his great-uncle to seize the Angkor throne and become Suryavarman II. He built Angkor Wat with the same precision and same lotus towers as Phimai, only on a colossally greater scale. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a much wider spread of Angkor-style urban sites and religious monuments on the Isan Plateau.⁷⁵

From the late ninth century onwards, Angkor's magnetism was also felt in the Chaophraya Plain. Angkor-style temples were built at the passes on the three main routes from the east down into the plain, and at the three major settlements along this cultural border – Si Thep, Muang Sema, and Si Mahosot. One temple at Muang Sema was converted from Buddhism to Saivism. An 868 Khmer-language inscription about Si Canasa records the erection of a Shiva-*linga*.⁷⁶ In this same era, the pattern of settlement shifted again. Several places founded around the sixth century declined or were abandoned. In the case of U Thong, the river shifted, cutting off easy access to the gulf. In the other cases, there may have been epidemics, or other places became more attractive. Some sites, particularly Nakhon Pathom and Si Thep, seem to have been enlarged.

Possibly there were migrations from the Khmer country. Along the Suphan-Thachin and MaeKlong rivers, new places appeared with some of the distinctive features of Angkorian town-planning – squarish plans roughly aligned to the compass, central monuments, a surrounding moat or earthwork, ponds or *barai* outside, and dykes built across the slope of the land to catch the runoff for irrigation. Along the MaeKlong River, the ruins are mainly laterite and the sites have yielded images of the radiating Avalokiteshwara and other trace of Mahayanist Bayon style. Along the Thachin River, the ruins are mainly clay bricks and the sites have yielded images of Buddha under *naga*. Perhaps there were two groups of migrants.⁷⁷ Elsewhere Angkorian-style temples were built in existing towns, such as Nakhon Pathom, Lopburi, Ratchaburi, and Phetchaburi. These places tended to be the towns of the future, perhaps because Khmer-style water management supported a larger and healthier population. The people of U Thong may have moved 30 kilometers northeast to Suphanburi where the town's design is a fascinating hybrid. In the

⁷⁵ Srisakara, *Isan*, 236–7.

⁷⁶ Mayuri, “Si janasa rue janaspura,” 108–9; Chalit, “Mueang sema khue sun klang si janasa,” 129, 139–46.

⁷⁷ Podjanok et al., “Tracing post-Dvaravati culture from space”; Woodward, “Studies in the art of Central Siam,” 116–24.

“Dvaravati” style, the city was sited in a bend of the river closed by a moat measuring 1.9 by 0.7 kilometers, and had a major forest temple outside the walls, but the moat is a strict rectangle rather than the usual conch shape, and a relic stupa was built at the city center in Angkorian style. Both the walls and the stupa may date to the twelfth century.⁷⁸ Phetchaburi, legendarily founded or refounded in 1157/8, was also sited in a bend of a river with a wall and moat roughly 1 kilometer square, a Bayon-style temple, and possibly a relic stupa at the center.⁷⁹ Also at the same time, Angkor-influenced settlements appeared in frontier areas around the Chaophraya Plain – especially at Mueang Sing on the Three Pagodas route to the west, and at Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai on the river systems stretching to the north.

Some historians have assumed this extension of Angkorian styles across the Chaophraya Plain represents waves of conquest and domination, and have drawn maps showing boundaries of a “Khmer Empire” pushed gradually westwards over the centuries. Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the term “empire” has acquired some baggage. It implies conquest, administration, and extraction of resources. But there is little evidence to support the application of this model to Angkor and the Chaophraya Plain. While there are many inscriptional records and bas-reliefs about Angkor’s military expeditions to the east, there is only a single ambiguous reference to a military expedition in the west by Jayavarman VII.⁸⁰ From the Chaophraya Plain, there are none of the characteristic Angkorian inscriptions about official temple endowments, and only sparse references to Khmer-titled administrators.⁸¹ The Angkor records deal in detail with resource transfers, yet have nothing on flows from the provinces. Kulke argues that the Angkor heartland was self-sufficient, and its rulers had no need to look far afield for resources.⁸²

In the Chaophraya Plain, the adoption of Angkorian styles was patchy. Most likely, some local rulers chose to associate themselves with Angkor – by forming marriage connections with the Angkor rulers, sending symbolic tribute, building derivative monuments, even participating in the dynastic politics – while others did not.⁸³ Those that did make this association

⁷⁸ Manat, *Pravatisat mueang suphan*, esp. 77–86, 271–9; Julathat, “Bot-rian: rueang jedisathan nai suphanburi.”

⁷⁹ Smithies and Dhiravat, “Instructions given to the Siamese envoys,” 127; Muang Boran, *Chabap phetchaburi*.

⁸⁰ The Banteay Chhmar inscription (K.227) mentions Jayavarman VII and his son resisting an army in the west, but does not specify how far west, allowing the imagination free rein.

⁸¹ Vickery, “Cambodia and its neighbours,” 274.

⁸² Kulke, “The early and the imperial kingdom,” 13–14.

⁸³ Srisakara, *Isan*, 176–7.

presumably felt that they gained advantages – for the ruling family and for the town as a whole – by association with the most powerful and magnificent ritual center in the region. What was spreading was not Angkor's military power and bureaucratic reach, but its ritual magnetism.

At one place Angkorian influence was significantly stronger. Lopburi (Lavo, Lavapura) was sited on a slightly raised terrace which had been settled for over a millennium, and was connected by river to the gulf. It came under Angkor influence from the tenth century: a Buddha image found at the city's relic stupa has an inscription fragment that dates to 923 CE and may have been authored by Jayavarman IV of Angkor. Shortly after becoming ruler at Angkor in 1002, Suryavarman I commanded that anyone in Lavo disturbing the Buddhist monks and rishis who “offered their ardour” to him should be “seized and brought before a tribunal to hear their case.” Another undated inscription entrusts three Khmer-titled officials to oversee offerings to a Vishnu image. Elsewhere there is a reference to “*sruk* Lavo,” using the usual term for an Angkorian province. In 1191, a son of Jayavarman VII may have held an official position at Lopburi.⁸⁴ Over these three centuries, three large Khmer-style temples were built in the town. Prang Khaek, the earliest, may date to the tenth century. Wat Mahathat displays obvious homage to the towers at Phimai and Angkor Wat. Phra Prang Sam Yot copied the style of triple sanctuaries favored by Jayavarman VII.

Lopburi was clearly a political and cultural outpost of Angkor for two centuries or more, but the relationship was not a simple hierarchy. In Suryavarman II's procession sculpted in bas-relief in the southern gallery of Angkor Wat, Jayasinhavarman of Lavo is portrayed almost as grandly as Suyavarman himself, and his troops are distinctively dressed in elaborate helmets with animal heads. Suryavarman II patronized Buddhism at Lopburi, rather than the Saivism of his capital. A fragmentary inscription possibly shows an Angkor king honoring a local tutelary spirit.⁸⁵ The Lopburi rulers contracted marriage connections not only with Angkor but also with Pagan. Lavo sent many embassies to China, beginning in 1115. In 1155, the missions from Lohu (Lopburi) and Chenla (Angkor) arrived together. In 1225 a survey of ports sending ships to Guangzhou records Lohu as a tributary of Chenla. Between 1289 and 1299 Lohu sent five missions independently.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ See Sak-Humphry, *Sdok Kak Thom inscription*, 49 (Khmer text, 39–40); Vickery, “Reign of Sūryavarman I,” 240; inscription 19 and 20, Sāl sūn, in Coedès, *Recueil des inscriptions de Siam*, vol. 2, 23, 26–9 and Winai and Trongjai, *Moradok khwam songjam haeng nopphaburi*, 20–2, 294–303; K.285, Phimeankas, see Vickery, “Cambodia and its neighbours,” 278.

⁸⁵ K.410, Winai and Trongjai, *Moradok khwam songjam haeng nopphaburi*, 296–303.

⁸⁶ Suebsang, “Sino-Siamese tributary relations,” 1289–99; Winai and Trongjai, *Moradok khwam songjam haeng nopphaburi*, 25–7.

Some historians argue that Lavo was under Angkor control from the tenth to thirteenth centuries, but sent independent missions to China when Angkor was distracted by succession disputes, and finally spun free before 1289. More likely, the relationship was always somewhat flexible.

According to the eulogy by his son, Jayavarman VII built 107 hospitals (*arogyasala*) and another 121 “fire houses” (*vahnigrha*) ranged along roads from the capital, but none lie further west than Prachin at the edge of the Chaophraya Plain. Jayavarman VII also sent an image named Jayabuddhamahanatha, possibly his likeness, more likely a radiating Avalokiteshvara, to twenty-five cities, six of which were in the Chaophraya Plain: “Lavodayapura [Lopburi], Svarṇapura [Suphanburi], Sambūkapura [maybe Ban Pong], Jaya-Rājapuri [Ratchaburi], Jaya-Siṃhapuri [Mueang Sing], Jaya-Vajrapuri [Phetchaburi or Kamphaeng Phet].”⁸⁷ The presentation of these statues is sometimes read as evidence of rule, but without corroborating evidence of military or administrative power, a better characterization is cultural diplomacy.

Summary on the Growth of Towns

From the sixth to twelfth centuries, towns and small-scale polities spread across wide areas of the peninsula, the Isan Plateau, the lower Mekong basin, and the Chaophraya Plain. On the Chaophraya Plain, some forty moated towns developed, mostly alongside rivers. They exchanged more goods with one another, and with places farther afield to both east and west. Their rulers adopted Indic titles, marshaled labor for building moats, dykes, and temples, and patronized craftsmen with expertise in metalwork, stucco, and terracotta. These towns shared religious practice, art styles, and the Mon language (at least for inscriptions), but they do not seem to have been politically integrated, except perhaps in local confederations.

As the Angkor region developed into a magnificent capital, from the tenth century, its influence flowed into the Chaophraya Plain. Architecture, town planning, political vocabulary, and religious trends arrived, along with much else that cannot be seen. Possibly these transfers were the result of people migrating away from the Angkor heartland, carrying new ideas and expertise, and of local city lords drawing on Angkor’s power and magnificence for their own benefit.

⁸⁷ Woodward, “Jayabuddhamahānātha images of Cambodia”; Maxwell, “Stele inscription of Preah Khan,” 81–2, 95.

The Tai

Towards the end of the first millennium, settlement spread northward from the lower Chaophraya Plain. A Khmer-influenced town appeared at Sukhothai, perhaps in the tenth or eleventh century. Several small sites have been found in the upper reaches of all the main Chaophraya tributaries. In the legend of Chamadevi, a Mon princess from Lavo-Lopburi goes to found a new city of Hariphunchai (Lamphun). She travels north with 500 monks, 500 scholars, and a caravan of sculptors, painters, jewelers, goldsmiths, and other craftsmen. She provides areas in the new city for those born from the footprints of elephants, rhinos, and wild buffaloes – interpreted to mean the local hunter-gatherer population. This is a story of bringing civilization to a remote area. One chronicle dates this migration to 663 CE, but archeological evidence favors the eleventh or twelfth century.⁸⁸

In this same era, people speaking languages from the Tai family began moving into the upper reaches of the Chaophraya river system from the north. The first records are in old poems, stories, and chronicles.⁸⁹

The Tai have roots in southern China. When the Han Chinese moved southwards across the Yangzi in the last few centuries BCE, they found the region populated by many different peoples they described as “barbarians,” collectively termed as the Yue or Bai-yi. Chinese observers recorded how these people cultivated rice, built stilt houses without nails, tattooed their bodies, decorated their teeth, cultivated silkworms, used bronze drums in rituals, adopted snakes, frogs, and birds as totems, divined with chicken bones, liked antiphonal singing, and put women to work. They also spoke many tonal languages, likened to birdsong: “all twitter like birds and call like animals and their languages are not the same; they are as different from each other as are monkeys, snakes, fish, and tortoises.”⁹⁰ Several of these languages belonged to a grouping now known as Tai-Kadai or Kra-Dai. Originally found in central southern China, the speakers were pushed gradually south and then west, and fragmented into several groups living along the southern coast by the start of the Common Era.⁹¹

Over the next millennium, as the Han Chinese gradually occupied the south, most of the Yue or Bai-yi were sinicized, creating the hybrid cultures now found in southern China and their languages which retain traces of tonality.⁹² But not all were compliant. Around 220 BCE, “Yüeh

⁸⁸ Srisakara, *Mueang boran nai anajak sukhothai*; Swearer and Sommai, *Legend of Queen Cāma*, 55–62.

⁸⁹ Sarassawadee, *History of Lan Na*, 17.

⁹⁰ Barlow, *Zhuang*, ch. 4, from the *Man Shu*.

⁹¹ Chamberlain, “Kra-Dai.”

⁹² Holm, “Layer of Old Chinese readings,” 29–30.

people fled into the depths of the mountains and forests, and it was not possible to fight them.”⁹³ People resisting integration moved into the high valleys among the mountains in the interior of the southwest. The Chinese sent garrisons to impose control, but faced constant resistance. The ancestor of the Tai languages probably took shape among the remnants of many Yue peoples thrown together in these hills.

In the early seventh century, the Tang court resolved to pacify the area by force. In 722, 400,000 rose in revolt behind a leader who declared himself king of the Nan Yue. Some 60,000 were beheaded after his defeat. In 756, another revolt attracted 200,000 followers and lasted four years. In the 860s, many local people sided with attackers from Nanchao, and in the aftermath some 30,000 of them were beheaded. In the 1040s, a powerful matriarch-shamaness, her chiefly husband, and their son, Nong Zhi-gao (Nung Tri Cao), raised a revolt, took Nanning, besieged Guangzhou for fifty-seven days, and slew the commanders of five Chinese armies sent against them before they were defeated, and many of their leaders killed.⁹⁴ Over these three bloody centuries, some people began to migrate westward. Linguistic evidence suggests these movements began between the eighth and tenth centuries.⁹⁵

There are only fragmentary records of this movement, which was not a mass migration at a single time, but many small groups scattered across many decades. The Vietnamese recorded groups of two to three thousand “Mang savages” passing by.⁹⁶ In the chronicle of the Tai-Ahom, the pioneers arrive in Assam with 9,000 people, eight nobles, two elephants, and 300 horses.⁹⁷ Some legendary accounts talk of a single pioneer, a couple, a pair of brothers, or a handful of families. Map 1.3, which overlays the linguists’ family tree on the geography, shows the general pattern not the specific routes, which would have snaked along the rivers and over the lower passes. The early migrants may have moved north into upper Guangxi and Guizhou. A second stream crossed the Vietnamese cordillera into the Mekong valley. The third and major stream started along old trade routes up the Black and Red rivers, then branched westward through the hills.

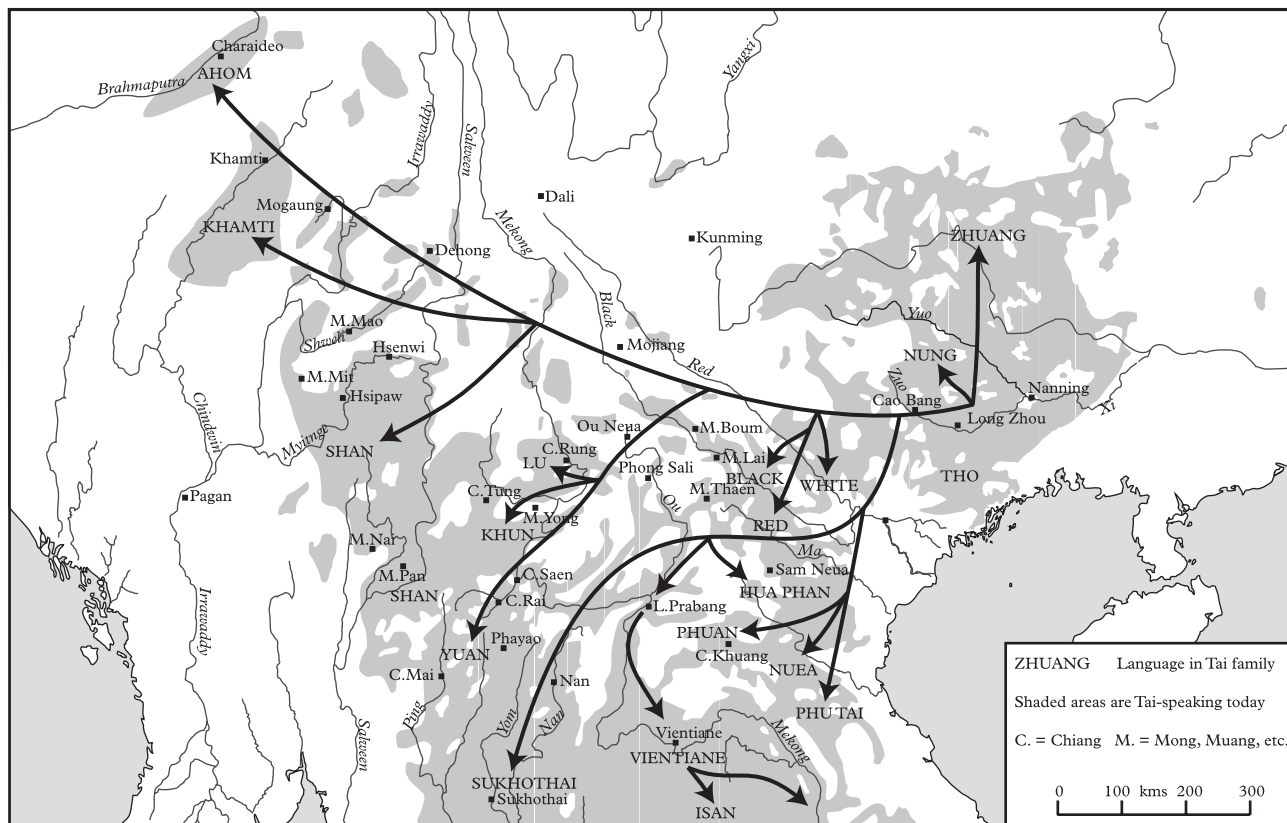
⁹³ Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, 18, quoting the *Huai nan tzu*; Holm, “Layer of Old Chinese readings,” 33–4.

⁹⁴ Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, 245–7; Evans, “Tai original diaspora”; Barlow, *Zhuang*; Anderson, *Rebel den of Nung Tri Cao*.

⁹⁵ The southwestern Tai languages had absorbed many words from Late Middle Chinese, dated to the seventh century; see Pittayawat, “Layers of Chinese loanwords,” 63–4; Chamberlain, “Kra-Dai,” 69–71.

⁹⁶ Gait, *History of Assam*, 73; Kelley, “Tai words and the place of the Tai in the Vietnamese past,” 143; Baker, “From Yue to Tai,” 9–10.

⁹⁷ Gait, *History of Assam*, 73.



Map 1.3. The spread of Tai languages

In the thirteenth century, raids by the Chinese frontier states of Nanzhao (Nanchao) and Dali and by the Mongols may have pushed some of this stream southward along the rivers, especially the Shweli, Salween, and Mekong. In the 1250s, the Mongol leader Khubilai Khan attacked south towards Pagan. In the 1290s, Mongol forces attacked Ch'eli (Chiang Rung) and Chiang Mai, subdued "over twenty kingdoms," and sent an embassy to Angkor.⁹⁸ But the area remained rebellious and difficult to control. The Mongol court ordered armies south six times between 1297 and 1312, but the 1301–2 campaign resulted in a mutiny, the "ruin of the army," and subsequent execution of the Chinese military commander, while the 1312 effort collapsed because of "pestilence and other hardships."⁹⁹ Mongol officials began to argue that the mountains, forests, fevers, and supply difficulties meant the military losses outweighed any gains. Local chiefs sent tribute of elephants, and the Mongol threat passed, but this pressure had probably deflected some Tai southward into Mainland Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁰

In many sites along this 1,000-kilometer arc from Guangxi to Assam, the Tai became the dominant community and their language the dominant language. Condominas argued that the Tai diffusion was "the work of small groups of warriors led by an aristocracy which succeeded in imposing itself on numerous and varied groups of people covering vast territories."¹⁰¹ Certainly, the struggle with the Han Chinese had created a warrior culture in the valleys of the Guangxi interior. Their armies were based on a three-man unit which farmed together and also fought as a team: "One man carried the shield which covered the body and the other two threw spears from behind ... They came on like a southern fire." The Nong group, which rebelled in the eleventh century, bred horses for cavalry, tattooed their bodies, fought with swords and crossbows, built hill-top forts for defense, and recruited women as warriors.¹⁰² But military force alone may not be a sufficient explanation for the spread of Tai languages.

Legendary accounts of these migrations share several themes, particularly the search for good rice land. The *Khram to muang* of the Black Tai relates:

⁹⁸ Luce, "Early Syam in Burma's history: a supplement," 72; Flood, "Sukhothai-Mongol relations," 221; Zhou, *Record of Cambodia*.

⁹⁹ Luce, "Early Syam in Burma's history," 165–6, and "Early Syam in Burma's history: a supplement," 77–80; Chen, *Frontier land systems*, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Luce, "Early Syam in Burma's history," 164–71 and "Early Syam in Burma's history: a supplement," 79; Hsieh, "On the dynamics of Tai/Dai-Lue ethnicity," 308–9.

¹⁰¹ Condominas, *From Lawa to Mon*, 73.

¹⁰² Barlow, "Zhuang minority peoples," 253, 257–8; Schafer, *Vermilion bird*, 50, 56.

This last child had no ricefield...
 He set forth to establish a territory of his own ...
 Muang Theng was round like a winnowing basket,
 A valley gently curved as a buffalo horn.
 It was a good place, wide, with ricefields on either side,
 A desirable place where thousands could live.
 The Ancestors founded Muang Theng.¹⁰³

Languages often become dominant in an area because their speakers have some economic asset. The Tai did not bring rice, which had long been present in these hills, but they may have brought techniques for a higher and more secure yield, developed during their sojourn in the hills of southwest China. The Chinese observed that the people in these hills grew rice watered by the run-off from karst outcrops, using dikes, retention dams, bamboo pipes, stone-lined ditches, and lifting devices.¹⁰⁴ Across the hills, the sites chosen by Tai settlements have a distinctive topography: a large basin, often at a confluence where the rivers had created a broad alluvial plain, with streams flowing from the surrounding hills that can be tapped for irrigation.

These sites were not empty and the Tai had to confront earlier populations. In some legends there is conflict. The Black Tai find an excellent valley by the Red River but the resident Laha are fierce and initially unwelcoming. When the Black Tai leader asks to marry the chief's daughter, the chief brings fifty bodyguards to the wedding feast, displaying a conspicuous lack of trust, but these guards are persuaded to stack their weapons and proceed to get drunk. The Tai kill the Laha chief, his daughter is rendered speechless by this treachery, and the other Laha run away in fright.¹⁰⁵ At the end of such tales, the Tai take possession of the valley, and their predecessors retreat to the hills.

In some places the Tai may have triumphed by bringing diseases for which the isolated local communities had no defensive immunity. At Hariphunchai, there is a devastating epidemic:

Those who lived in houses with a cholera victim contracted the disease in such increasing numbers that none of them survived ... the remaining population of Haripuñjaya, in order to save their own lives, fled to a city named Sudhamma and settled there.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Chamberlain, "Black Tai chronicle," 45, 49. Muang Theng is modern Dien Bien Phu.

¹⁰⁴ Barlow, *Zhuang*, ch. 2.1.

¹⁰⁵ Phatthiya, *Pravattisat sipsong chuthai*, 147–52; Chamberlain, "Black Tai chronicle," 67–8.

¹⁰⁶ Swearer and Sommai, *Legend of Queen Cāma*, 105–6.

In the foundation story of Chiang Saen, a flood carries away the total population except one old woman, the sole person not to eat a huge albino eel on the previous day – a story which may combine both flood and epidemic.¹⁰⁷

Other tales tell of fraternity and compromise. In the *Suvanna khamdaeng* story, the Tai pioneer who is led to the new city by a golden deer announces, “It is necessary to obey the people who were born and live at that place.” He raises the Lawa chief to a high official rank and marries two of his daughters. The chief then teaches the Tai people how to live without theft, lying, adultery, drunkenness, or drugs. Both Lawa and Tai are happy. The rains are good. One year of cultivation yields seven harvests. People multiply and new settlements proliferate.¹⁰⁸ At the end of some such stories, the local people begin to imitate the “language and customs” of the Tai, and are eventually absorbed.¹⁰⁹

From the Mekong River, one of the main arteries of the Tai migrations, the headwaters of the Chaophraya tributaries are only a short distance to the south, separated by low ridges (see Map 2.2). Possibly the Tai made this crossing from the late twelfth century. In the *Sinhanavati* legend, the son of a Tai chief comes from the north, displaces some Lawa, and founds a town called Yonok, probably Chiang Saen. His descendants, harried by people who might be Mongols, are forced to flee south, first down the Kok River, where they found Fang, then across a low watershed into the Ping valley, where they found Chiang Rai in 1263. Towards the end of the century, they move further south to the Chiang Mai area, and the losing son in a succession dispute flees further south to found Kamphaeng Phet. Another stream branches south from the Mekong down the Ing River, founds Phayao, and then moves on to Chaliang (Si Satchanalai). In the Nan chronicle, the founders begin from the Mekong, settle first near the headwaters of the Nan River, and gradually shift south to found Nan in 1368.¹¹⁰

Warriors and Settlements

By the end of the thirteenth century, there were Tai settlements along the Middle Mekong and on the upper reaches of the Chaophraya river system down to the points where the rivers emerged from the hills. At

¹⁰⁷ Notton, *Annales du Siam*, vol. 1, *Sinhanavati*.

¹⁰⁸ Notton, *Annales du Siam*, vol. 1, 7–11.

¹⁰⁹ Wade, “*Bai-yi zhuan*,” 7.

¹¹⁰ Notton, *Annales du Siam*, vol. 1, *Sinhanavati*; Penth, “On the history of Chiang Rai”; Wyatt, *Nan chronicle*, 37–53.

these points, such as Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai, and Kamphaeng Phet, there were still hills that could be home to a guardian spirit as well as retaining water to irrigate the rice fields. Looking south, however, the landscape was irredeemably flat and hence alien. Only down the Ping River, where there are several hilly outcrops, did the settlements drift further south, to its juncture with the Nan River (modern Nakhon Sawan).

The legends and early inscriptions describe a culture dominated by warriors. The Chiang Mai chronicle describes one successful warrior thus:

Some [domains] he conquered and some he did not, taking one domain in some years and nine in others; sometimes taking two or three years for one; sometimes taking one without a battle. Those he took, he ruled, killing the rulers he conquered. When he killed the rulers, he would have one of his officers govern there, and sometimes he would maintain [the previous ruler] in charge.¹¹¹

Mangrai, the founder of Chiang Mai and perhaps the greatest chief of the era, had his thirteen-year-old son assassinated by a poisoned arrow for threatening revolt.¹¹² Fa Ngum, the founder of Lanxang (Lanchang), may have arranged the death of his own father to clear his way to the throne.¹¹³ Ramaraja (Ramkhamhaeng) of Sukhothai described how in his youth he often “raided a town or village and captured elephants, men and women, silver or gold,” and later as a ruler, he raided over a wide area and helped other warriors to establish their own *mueang*.¹¹⁴ Another Sukhothai noble described how, in his youth, he “knew the qualities of elephants, he knew the qualities of horses ... he knew the qualities of lions.” Between the ages of seventeen and twenty-six he fought three great duels with other nobles. In the last of these, he won even though his mount was female and his opponent was “riding a huge male war elephant, which was in rut... dripping oil [so abundantly] that it soaked his feet.” The clash of the two beasts, the stabbing of the great tusker, and the final pursuit are described in graphic and gory detail.¹¹⁵ These chiefs spent much of their reigns in the saddle, living in “improvised bamboo palaces and field camps.”¹¹⁶ They rewarded their valiant generals with command of outlying settlements, and showered them with gifts of gold, titles, regalia, and women. In laws ascribed to Mangrai, ordinary soldiers

¹¹¹ Wyatt, “Relics, oaths, and politics,” 46, quoting *Tamnan mangrai chiang mai chiang tung*.

¹¹² Wyatt and Aroonrut, *Chiang Mai chronicle*, 20–1.

¹¹³ Stuart-Fox, *Lao kingdom of Lan Xang*, 57.

¹¹⁴ Chulalongkorn University, *Inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng*; Griswold and Prasert, “Inscription of King Rāma Gamhèn,” 203–8.

¹¹⁵ Inscription 2, Griswold and Prasert, “King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya,” 115, 117; Winai, “Silajaruek wat si chum,” 70–4.

¹¹⁶ Tambiah, *World conqueror*, 89.

who take an enemy head are rewarded with promotion, land, money, regalia, and women, while failed warriors are liable to be killed.¹¹⁷

The warriors were at the peak of a steep social pyramid. In the Mangrai laws, people were organized under officials with decimal titles, a system probably inherited from the Han Chinese or the Mongols.¹¹⁸ The nobility was divided into at least three groups: the ruler's own family; other nobles who participated in the ruler's coronation; and the sub-rulers of outlying settlements and their family members.¹¹⁹ Ordinary people are described with many terms (*phrai fa*, *phrai tai*, *phrai fa na sai*, *phrai fa na pok*) which suggest a complex system of labor control, though the meanings are elusive. At Sukhothai, an officer with the title of *nai sayotha* was probably in charge of marshaling manpower, and people were bought and sold in the market alongside various animals.¹²⁰

By describing the virtues of good rulers, the inscriptions and law codes hint at the vices of bad ones. Lithai of Sukhothai (see below) is lauded because he refrained from killing people for minor crimes, subjecting weak people to heavy corvée, appropriating the property of nobles and commoners at death, seizing women at will, and interfering with people who trade. Mangrai's laws describe "Mara [demon] lords," epitomes of bad rulership, who "subject their citizens to extortion, flog them and tie them up with fetters or rope, bully or oppress them, seize their goods, cohabit with their daughters and nieces, or force their wives to sleep with them." Ramaraja of Sukhothai proclaims that he does not "connive with thieves or favor concealers of stolen goods," covet the wealth of others, or kill or beat enemy captives.¹²¹ These homilies would lack their moral force if the descriptions of misrule were unrealistic.

The Tai were not only pushed south by the Chinese, but also pulled south by commerce. All the main Tai towns were on rivers which served as routes between southwestern China and the sea. From Sukhothai, a land-based route also led down to the port of Martaban. When Mangrai shifted his capital to Chiang Mai, he began building the market "at the same time" as the palace.¹²² His decision to capture Hariphunchai (Lamphun) was motivated by trade:

¹¹⁷ Griswold and Prasert, "Judgments of King Mān Rāy," 148.

¹¹⁸ Griswold and Prasert, "Judgments of King Mān Rāy," 147–8.

¹¹⁹ Vickery, "Pitdown 3," 167–8.

¹²⁰ Nidhi, "Sangkhom lae watthanatham samai sukhothai," 99–100; Inscription 2, Griswold and Prasert, "King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya," 120.

¹²¹ Inscription 4, Griswold and Prasert, "Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja of Sukhodaya, part 1," 221–3; Trongjai, *Pramuan jaruek phraya lithai*, 195–6; Griswold and Prasert, "Judgments of King Mān Rāy," 154; Chulalongkorn University, *Inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great*; Griswold and Prasert, "Inscription of King Rāma Gamhēn," 207–10.

¹²² Wyatt and Aroonrut, *Chiang Mai chronicle*, 45.

Commerce was thriving. At that time, many parties of traders from Hariphunjai came to conduct commerce in Fang. King Mangrai therefore summoned the traders and asked them, "This Hariphunjai where you live: How prosperous is it?" A trader replied, "The Hariphunjai where I live is ... replete with all kinds of goods things. Traders of all countries frequent it both by land and by water to trade ..." King Mangrai upon hearing that Hariphunjai was wealthy was consumed with a desire to obtain it.¹²³

Sukhothai Inscription I vaunts the attractions of the city by stating: "whoever wants to trade in elephants does so; whoever wants to trade in horses does so; whoever wants to trade in silver and gold does so."¹²⁴ Another Sukhothai inscription from around 1360 recounts that "The people go by boat to trade or ride their horses to sell" under the protection of the ruler.¹²⁵ The story of Makadu hints at the close relationship of traders and rulers. Makadu comes from Martaban to trade at Sukhothai, where he rises to be governor of the palace. While the king is away at war, Makadu seduces the king's daughter, then persuades her to elope to escape retribution. Makadu returns to Martaban and grows so wealthy that the town's ruler plots to kill him, but Makadu acts first, killing the ruler and taking over the town. He then formally submits to the authority of Sukhothai. Rather than being angered at the elopement, the Sukhothai king welcomes the connection with such a wealthy and dutiful colleague. He sends a bunch of regalia and a golden inscription conferring on Makadu the title of *chao fa ruea* (prince of ships).¹²⁶ The story suggests great intimacy between trade and rule.

The legends and chronicles portray the warrior chiefs making alliances for mutual benefit, particularly at times of pressure from the Chinese or Mongols to the north. In the Chiang Mai chronicle, Ramaraja of Sukhothai and Ngam Mueang of Phayao decide they are fictive brothers.¹²⁷ In 1393, Nan and Sukhothai agreed to help one another in case of "trouble" or attack, and to return people, animals, and fleeing criminals who crossed their mutual border. This agreement was written on stone, and subject to a moral community of supernatural forces including the ancestral spirits of both ruling lines, of all their deceased rulers, of the major rivers, caves, and mountains in the region, of other noble lines, and a list of Indic deities.¹²⁸ The negotiation of friendship between

¹²³ Wyatt and Aroonrut, *Chiang Mai chronicle*, 18–19.

¹²⁴ Chulalongkorn University, *Inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great*.

¹²⁵ Inscription 3, Griswold and Prasert, "Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja of Sukhodaya, part 1," 109; Trongjai, *Pramuan jaruek phraya lithai*, 181.

¹²⁶ Griswold and Prasert, "King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya," 41–7; Guillon, *Mons*, 156–7.

¹²⁷ Wyatt and Aroonrut, *Chiang Mai chronicle*, 25–7.

¹²⁸ Griswold and Prasert, "Pact between Sukhodaya and Nān."

Phayao and Sukhothai is told by the Chiang Mai chronicle with a little more spice. Ngam Mueang of Phayao slights one of his beautiful wives by criticizing her cooking, and then leaves town. The ruler of Sukhothai passes by and, taking his opportunity, “seduced her many times.” When Ngam Mueang finds out, he launches into a pursuit told with as many magical transformations as a Chinese movie, and finally locks up his rival in a cage. Soon after, he relents and calls on Mangrai to arbitrate. The Sukhothai ruler agrees to apologize and pay an indemnity, following which the three rulers drink their mingled blood to seal an oath of life-long friendship.¹²⁹

Through such alliances, three loose confederations of towns formed in the interior between the end of the thirteenth century and the mid-fourteenth. Lanna emerged on the upper reaches of the Chaophraya tributaries, put together by Mangrai with a capital at Chiang Mai, legendarily founded in 1296. Lanxang was formed around the middle Mekong in the mid-fourteenth century. The third, at the fringe of the hills, acquired no name but was seen from Ayutthaya as the *mueang nuea* or Northern Cities. With the lingering warrior ethic, and a splintered geography of river valleys divided by hill ridges, these confederations were always loose and fractious, occasionally united by a strong leader through conquest, alliance, and marriage ties, but soon after torn apart by feuds.

Sukhothai

At the end of the thirteenth century, Sukhothai emerged as the chief place in the Northern Cities. Its population seems to have come from both south and north. In the plain around the town are some thirty moated sites which resemble those found in the Chaophraya Plain and Isan Plateau over the previous five centuries, so they may be part of a drift northward captured in the Chamadevi story. To the west of the town, there are earthworks to direct water flowing down from the hills in the characteristic style of Tai settlements.¹³⁰ A Khmer-style town appeared, probably around 1200. Later in the thirteenth century, a much larger walled and moated town measuring 1.9 by 1.4 kilometers was built immediately to the south, suggesting an influx of people. The new town had the classic Angkor-influenced design with a square shape, a relic stupa near the center, and a *barai* outside the walls. In the earliest Sukhothai inscription, dated to 1292, the titles used are by origin Khmer

¹²⁹ Wyatt and Aroonrut, *Chiang Mai chronicle*, 23–5.

¹³⁰ Srisakara, *Mueang boran nai anajak sukhothai*.

(*kamraten an*, *somdet*), Mon (*phra*, *phraya*), general Indic (*rajakumar*), Chinese (*khun*), Tai (*chao*, *thao*), and various combinations of these.¹³¹ Sukhothai was a cosmopolitan settlement.

According to a later inscription, a warrior chief named Si Nao Nam Thum, who had raided all around the upper Chaophraya Basin in the early thirteenth century, gained control of Sukhothai by an elephant duel with a Mon. He ruled both Sukhothai and nearby Si Satchanalai, and built a great stupa, but then seems to have lost the two towns. His son Pha Mueang, who ruled a place called Mueang Rat, had “a thousand elephants, his country was girt about by areca palms, and countless cities paid him homage.”¹³² From the Khmer ruler at Angkor, he received a title (*kamraten an*), a regalia sword, and a princess in marriage. Another local chief called Bang Klang Hao rounded up some troops and captured both Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai from a “valiant” person holding a Khmer-style title (*khom sabatkhlon lamphong*). Bang Klang Hao formally offered the towns to Pha Mueang who declined, and instead invested Bang Klang Hao as the new ruler, and transferred to him his Khmer-bestowed title of Si Indra(patindra)dit.

In the old reading of this story, the “valiant” person is transformed into the “commander of the Khmer garrison,” suggesting a prior military occupation, and this event represents “the liberation of Sukhodaya from Khmer suzerainty and the establishment of the independent kingdom under a *Tai* dynasty.”¹³³ The ethnic framing and concept of “liberation” have been imported from another era. In the modern reading, the inscription tells of victory by one local lord associated with Angkor over another warrior with a Khmer title. The story of the foundation of Lanxang (Luang Prabang) is similar: a local chief, Fa Ngum, travels to Angkor, returns with a Khmer wife, and proceeds to subdue other local chiefs. In this era, local chiefs drew legitimacy from association with distant but resplendent Angkor.

By raiding and marriage alliance, Bang Klang Hao’s son Ramaraja dominated a territory which his grandson Lithai described as “vast, extending in every direction.”¹³⁴ As elsewhere in this era, such warrior

¹³¹ Vickery, “Pitdown 3,” 167.

¹³² Mueang Rat may have been Thung Yang. Phiset, *Phra maha thammaracha*, 11, 16–17; Winai, “Silajaruek wat si chum,” 41; Inscription 2, Griswold and Prasert, “King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya,” 109.

¹³³ Inscription 2, Griswold and Prasert, “King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya,” 85, 110 fn. 37.

¹³⁴ The fourth face of Sukhothai Inscription 1 contains a long list of dependents, but the text on this face is generally believed to be a late addition. Ramaraja’s expeditions probably extended over a similar area as those of his grandson, Lithai, described later in this paragraph.

dominance was ephemeral. Under his successor in the early fourteenth century “the country was torn ... into many fragments and pieces” as nine or ten local chiefs broke away.¹³⁵ Lithai had to attack Sukhothai and break down its gates to regain control. Through the 1350s, Lithai mounted a series of expeditions to demand submission from surrounding rulers – along the Ping, Yom, and Pasak rivers; up through Phrae to Nan – and concluded marriage alliances with the most important. In inscriptions made around 1361, Lithai alluded to “poison in the fish, potions in the rice” and repeatedly cited his compassion towards “people who cheated or betrayed him, or people who tried to poison him,” suggesting another time of turmoil and fragmentation.¹³⁶

Lithai took the title Phra Maha Thammaracha which was adopted as the royal title by his descendants. The clan remained *primus inter pares* in the Northern Cities but no more than that. Branches of the family broke away to rule at other cities, and at times there was more than one town ruler holding the Phra Maha Thammaracha title. Other clans also developed their own ruling title, particularly at Phichai and Kamphaeng Phet.¹³⁷ This was an era of city-states, not larger kingdoms.

In the mid-fourteenth century, the political center of the Northern Cities shifted to Phitsnulok, perhaps for strategic or commercial reasons, perhaps because the agricultural hinterland of Sukhothai could not support a large population.¹³⁸ Sukhothai’s prominence as a political center had lasted less than a century. In religion and art, however, the city’s importance was greater and more long-lasting.

Lankan Buddhism

In the twelfth century, the king of Sri Lanka unified the monkhood under the Mahavihara temple in Anuradhapura. Over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a network was created linking this center to Buddhist communities in Arakan, Thaton, Pagan, Martaban, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Sukhothai, Chiang Mai, and Ayutthaya. Aided by the increase in marine

¹³⁵ Inscription 3, Griswold and Prasert, “Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja of Sukhodaya, part 1,” 106–7; Trongjai, *Pramuan jaruek phraya lithai*, 180.

¹³⁶ Inscription 5, Griswold and Prasert, “Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja of Sukhodaya, part 1,” 155, fn. 21, translation modified in line with Trongjai, *Pramuan jaruek samai phraya lithai*, 195–6.

¹³⁷ Phiset, *Phra maha thammaracha*, 79–86.

¹³⁸ Srisakara, *Mueang boran nai anajak sukhothai*; Piriya, *Sinlapa sukhothai lae ayutthaya*, 98.

trade, monks traveled between these centers, exchanging texts, rituals and portable artifacts like cloth paintings and molded tablets. These exchanges helped to develop distinctive practices in which the renunciant monk had a leading role. These practices have often been shorthand as “Lankan” but were the product of exchange between several centers.

In the early fourteenth century, the Martaban ruler sent twelve monks to Sri Lanka to be reordained at the monastery of Udumbaragiri near Polonnaruwa. On their return in 1331, they established a new order which became known as the Aranyavasin or “forest monks,” practicing a more rigorous form of monastic discipline, including a refusal to reside at monasteries in towns, long spells wandering in the forests, and ascetic practices for self-purification. The new order rapidly attracted followers.

Probably in the late thirteenth century, a monk came to Sukhothai from Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Ramaraja built a forest monastery for him outside the city.¹³⁹ In the early fourteenth century, a Sukhothai monk, Sujato, went to study in Sri Lanka for five years and Pagan for another five before establishing himself at Ayutthaya. In the 1330s, two monks from Sukhothai went to study for five years at Martaban where they were reordained according to Lankan practice. They returned to Sukhothai for another five years, then traveled again to Martaban to gain their Thera (elder) qualification and to bring eight other monks for reordination. The original two then settled at forest monasteries at Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai.¹⁴⁰

These monks brought from Lanka new “teachings and disciplinary rules.” They claimed the authenticity of being ordained in the Lankan lineage which stretched back to the Buddha and his disciples, and of following correct practice on wording of ordination, wearing of the robe, chanting, and so on. This authenticity was a source of great authority.¹⁴¹ Their arrival seems to have combined with a social upheaval. When the Sukhothai monks traveled north to Lanna, the *wat* chronicles describe a frenzy, with people flocking to be ordained “each day ten men, twenty men, thirty men, forty men, fifty men, a hundred men, numerous in number until living quarters could not be found.” The monks founding new *wat* “each year ten monasteries, twenty monasteries, thirty, forty, fifty monasteries ... totaling five hundred, all exceedingly prosperous.”¹⁴² In the 1430s, another Chiang Mai monk, Nanagambhira, returned from

¹³⁹ Griswold and Prasert, “Inscription of King Rāma Gamhèn,” 212.

¹⁴⁰ Sommai and Swearer, “Translation of *Tamnān mūlasāsanā*,” 80–1; Ratanapanna Thera, *Sheaf of garlands*, 117.

¹⁴¹ Sommai and Swearer, “Translation of *Tamnān mūlasāsanā*,” 77, 80, 87–92; Prapod, *Ascendency of Theravāda Buddhism*, 176.

¹⁴² Mangrai, *Pādaeng chronicle*, 111–12.

Sri Lanka to Sukhothai where he reordained 7,520 monks, after which “The king had his ministers and the citizens of Sukhodaya, numbering 1,000, ordained into the new order.”¹⁴³ Many new *wat* were built in Sukhothai at this time, both inside the walls and in the surrounding area. New designs and building techniques were employed to build preaching halls that were larger and could accommodate more people, suggesting increased numbers of devotees.¹⁴⁴

The popularity of these monks was part of a transition in these warrior-dominated societies, visible in stories of dramatic religious awakening. Pha Mueang, the warrior who relinquished his rule of Sukhothai to Bang Klang Hao, retired to a life of religious zeal: “he caused cetiyas to be built, he earned the gratitude of many kings, he was the teacher and protector of a whole throng of monarchs ... he bestowed alms ... on venerable persons in enormous quantity.”¹⁴⁵ Ramaraja’s Inscription I, of 1292, tells a similar story, first recording his youthful exploits as a warrior, then boasting of the Buddhist features of his Sukhothai: “there are viharas, there are golden statues of the Buddha, and eighteen-cubit statues; there are big statues of the Buddha and medium-sized ones, there are big viharas and medium-sized ones; there are senior monks, nissayamuttakas, theras and mahatheras.”¹⁴⁶

The epitome of this transition from warlordism to devotion is the story of Pha Mueang’s grandson who had spent his youth in elephant duels. He was disturbed so much by the death of a young son that he “saw that this world of rebirths is impermanent ... He destroyed all his weapons ... He longed to live in the forest ... renounce his [princely] caste and leave his home.” He became a monk under the name Si Sattha (in full, Si Sattharajachulamani), and wandered around the neighboring region, performing good works, and establishing or restoring religious sites. “At one place he went through the market buying up all the living creatures and setting them free ... such as human beings, goats, pig, dogs, ducks, chickens, geese, birds, fish, deer.”¹⁴⁷ He traveled via Martaban to India, where he was again active in restoring religious sites, and then to Sri Lanka. After ten years, in the mid-1340s, he returned to Sukhothai with two relics and a group of Sinhalese craftsmen, and was probably instrumental in the construction of Wat Si Chum, the largest monument apart

¹⁴³ Sommai and Swearer, “Translation of *Tamnan mūlasāsanā*,” 92–3.

¹⁴⁴ Gosling, *Chronology of religious architecture*, 93–5, 126–9. Some of Gosling’s work dating of styles has been challenged, but her correlation of epigraphic data and groundplans is more secure.

¹⁴⁵ Inscription 2, Griswold and Prasert, “King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya,” 112.

¹⁴⁶ Chulalongkorn University, *Inscription of King Ramkamhaeng the Great*, side 2 (translation slightly modified).

¹⁴⁷ Inscription 2, Griswold and Prasert, “King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya,” 117–18, 120; Winai, “Silajaruek wat si chum,” 74, 78.

from the central relic stupa. The *jataka* illustrations enshrined within the *wat*'s walls show traces of Lankan style.¹⁴⁸ The inscription found at the *wat* portrays Si Sattha as a model of monastic devotion:

He likes to observe the precepts and meditate in the depths of woods and forests, absorbed in thought, forgetting to eat ... His daily routine is like [that of] Sinhala in every way. He likes to wander about the country in search of wisdom ... He likes to practice asceticism. He is not idle by day or by night, because he earnestly desires to accumulate the requisites of Buddhahood.¹⁴⁹

The inscription stresses Si Sattha's role as the initiator and executor of this immense construction project, while the reigning king (Ramaraja's son, Lithai's father) receives only a perfunctory mention. Si Sattha's Lankan artisans also worked on expansion of Wat Mahathat, the city's central, grandest, and most distinctive monument. The iconography emphasized the life of the Buddha and the stature of the *sangha* (monkhood). The surrounding towers were probably decorated with a series of bas-reliefs depicting the biography of the historical Buddha, while the base of the main stupa was ringed with a frieze of walking monks, which became a popular motif in Sukhothai architecture.

In the early 1340s, the king's son and heir, Lithai, went to reside in Si Satchanalai, where he devoted himself to religious study and patronage. He is accredited with composing the *Traiphum phra ruang*, a massive Buddhist cosmology, with the help of two teachers and seven monks, one of whom had traveled to Sri Lanka.¹⁵⁰ He repaired Si Satchanalai's Wat Mahathat, and built several other new temples, with inscriptions recording the people's joy at these acts of devotion.

This religious enthusiasm had political implications which surface in stories about relics. Believed to be ashes and fragments retrieved after the Buddha's cremation, relics had been brought to the region over several centuries. Their arrival and enshrinement were one of the several ways in which a locality was brought into the sacred geography of a Buddhist universe. Some relics were brought from Sri Lanka. Others traveled to the region by their own power and were discovered by monks with the help of revelation and insight. Relics proved their authenticity by performing magic acts, especially whizzing about in the air and emitting colorful rays. The ability to find such hidden relics, and to provoke these authenticating performances, implied a high degree of religious merit.

Stories about relics hint at the tension between rulers and religion. According to two *wat* chronicles, Si Sattha discovered a relic while

¹⁴⁸ Pattaratorn, "Illustrating the lives of the bodhisatta," 28–39.

¹⁴⁹ Inscription 2, Griswold and Prasert, "King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya," 113–14; Winai, "Silajaruek wat si chum," 66–7.

¹⁵⁰ Reynolds and Reynolds, *Three worlds*, 46.

traveling from Sukhothai to Si Satchanalai. At Lithai's invitation, Si Sattha brought the relic to Si Satchanalai and kept it in Wat Mahathat. He and Lithai together made offerings to the relic, which shot up into the air "like a dancing hamsa bird" and emitted six-colored rays. "All the people saw this stupendous miracle, which quickly made them rejoice even more than before." The king sent for the relic to be brought to Sukhothai. The chronicle relates in dramatic detail that the king honored and beseeched the relic but "it did not perform a single miracle ... because that city was not the place where the Lord Buddha's relic would remain."¹⁵¹ Such stories, repeated elsewhere, emphasize that religious power was contained within the *sangha* and not available to the king.

From Lanna, the *wat* chronicles describe a long struggle between monks and kings, depicting an axial period for the transformation of warrior chiefs into Buddhist kings. At Sukhothai, from where no *wat* chronicle is known, this struggle can be seen less dramatically in the inscriptions. Rulers tried to bring this new force under control by ordaining into the monkhood in order to share in the institution's moral power, lavishing patronage, and claiming the authority to appoint or approve a religious hierarchy.

After Lithai succeeded his father as ruler at Sukhothai in the mid-fourteenth century, he continued his good works, building and repairing several temples, and installing replicas of the Buddha's footprint, based on a model he had seen from Sri Lanka, on four nearby hills (another technique of sacred geography). In an inscription commemorating the installation of another relic brought from Sri Lanka in 1357 Lithai set out a manifesto of Buddhist rulership. As background he notes the decline of an old order: since the early thirteenth century, "the princes, Brahmins and wealthy merchants deteriorated from then on; those learned in astrology and medicine deteriorated from then on, and did not behave correctly."¹⁵² Then he presents a justification of his right to rule. First of all he is a devout Buddhist, who "follows the five precepts at all times," painstakingly conducts ceremonies, gives alms, and studies the texts. Second, he has an extraordinary range and depth of knowledge covering calendrical astronomy, weather forecasting, geography, religious practice, medicine, curative magic, and elephant lore. Third, he delivers fair judgments, and refrains from killing people for minor crimes, subjecting weak people to heavy corvée, appropriating the property of nobles and commoners at death, or seizing women at will. Fourth, he promotes agricultural expansion and trade by clearing forest, building irrigation works, planting "coconuts and jackfruits everywhere," and protecting traders. He sums up: "Any ruler who

¹⁵¹ Griswold and Prasert, "King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya," 63, 65.

¹⁵² Inscription 3, Griswold and Prasert, "Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja of Sukhodaya, part 1," 96–7, translation modified in line with Trongjai, *Pramuan jaruek phraya lithai*, 175.

acts in accordance with these principles ... will rule this *muang* for a very long time; any (ruler) who acts in violation of them will not last long.”¹⁵³

Through a mixture of patronage and religious devotion, Lithai endeavored to gain power of appointment over monastic posts. In 1359, he went to Wat Padaeng, a forest monastery in Si Satchanalai, to preside over its abbot's funeral, and to formally appoint the successor. Two years later in 1361, Lithai had the Mango Grove monastery enlarged and beautified, and imported another Lanka-trained monk from Martaban to head it. He cast a massive Buddha image for Wat Mahathat, and had himself ordained into the monkhood there. In the four commemorating inscriptions, Lithai claimed, “I do not wish for the treasure of a *cakkavattin* or of Indra or of Brahma. I wish only to free myself, to become a Buddha in order to lead all creatures to cross these three realms” – upon which, the earth quaked and various other miracles occurred.¹⁵⁴ In the 1410s, a Sukhothai ruler was able to appoint the heads of religious orders and preside over an ecclesiastical court, and there were officials who looked after relations between ruler and *sangha*.¹⁵⁵

Although Sukhothai faded as a political center in the late fourteenth century, it expanded as a religious center. Several large standing *attharasa* or “18-cubit” Buddha images were created, based on the Buddha's legendary height, and also large footprints. As commonly happens, the religious enthusiasm of this period found expression in striking works of artistic creativity, especially Buddha images cast in bronze or carved in stone for *wat* decoration. The distinctive Sukhothai images of the walking Buddha and the seated Buddha touching the earth radiate a combination of moral strength, compassion, and calm. Perhaps these reflect the hope invested in Buddhism in a time of great social change.

Summary on the Tai and Sukhothai

The Tai who arrived in the Chaophraya Plain were product of a turbulent history. In the society that developed in Sukhothai and other Northern Cities by the thirteenth century, the Tai and their warrior chiefs were thrown together with older Mon-Khmer residents, often generically termed Lawa, and people who had drifted north from the city-states of

¹⁵³ Inscription 3, Griswold and Prasert, “Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja of Sukhodaya, part 1,” 103–10; Trongjai, *Pramuan jaruek phraya lithai*, 176–82.

¹⁵⁴ Inscription 4, Griswold and Prasert, “Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja of Sukhodaya, part 1,” 142–3, translation modified in line with Trongjai, *Pramuan jaruek phraya lithai*, 223.

¹⁵⁵ Griswold and Prasert, “Epigraphic and historical studies, no. 12,” 95–6, 108–12; Griswold and Prasert, “Declaration of independence,” 236–42; Ishii, *Sangha, state and society*, 62.

the lower Chaophraya Plain and perhaps from Angkor too. Sukhothai's art, architecture, water management, and language show that the place was a cultural crossroads, absorbing influences from Angkor, Pagan, the Mon country, Lanna, and the peninsula. The ex-warrior Si Saththa's description of his own apotheosis – destroying his weapons, freeing people in the markets, taking up the robe – can be read as metaphor for a broader social crisis in which a warrior ethic was challenged by the humanism of resurgent Buddhism. The cultural innovation of Sukhothai was not the work of “Tai genius” but the product of a collision of different peoples, a social crisis, and the influx of new ideas.

Conclusion

In the old historiography, the main driver of the early history of the Chaophraya Basin was the arrival of the Tai into a seemingly almost empty space. This interpretation has been supplanted as a result of a generation of work by archeologists and cultural historians, who have written a four-millennium story of hunter-gatherers, agriculturists, and metal-workers. While outside influences – cultural from India, economic from China – played a large role, the main theme is gradual, long-term, local evolution with successive shifts to larger settlements, resulting in a society of riverside towns in the last half of the first millennium.

Because this story has been built from cultural material much more than written sources, there has been a tendency to imagine the political history from the cultural one. The idea of a major “Dvaravati kingdom” has taken shape as a by-product of the art historian's adoption of “Dvaravati” as the convenient tag for a set of styles. The reach of a “Khmer Empire” has been imagined from the spread of fashions in sculpture and architecture. Sources may yet emerge to ground these concepts, but until then it is safer to let the cultural remain cultural. The Chaophraya Plain in the second half of the first millennium CE was a society of small and medium-sized towns, rather remote from each other, probably independent, and rather varied in their town plans, monuments, and artifacts.

The emergence of confederations of towns in Lanna, Lanxang, and the Northern Cities over the twelfth to fourteenth centuries was a product of many causes, not only the arrival of the Tai, but also a northward drift of people from the lower plain, intermittent pressure from China, and perhaps also developments in trade. The arrival of reformed Buddhist practice from Sri Lanka and Burma combined with some kind of social upheaval to force a transition from warrior dominance to Buddhist-influenced kingship.

In the same era, a similar confederation developed to the south, near the coast of the gulf, under the influence of similar factors, but also of the sea.